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AUTHOR Buzza, Bonnie Wilson
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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is widespread on college campuses across the United States and is a subject that merits sensitive and sensible discussion. Once they acknowledge the problem, speech communication professionals can become better informed about sexual harassment and ways of dealing with it, and commit themselves to responsible communicative action. First, speech professionals must initiate discussions among friends, colleagues, administrators, staff, and students and confront the fears and faults of their institutions and of society as a whole. Second, individuals experiencing a situation that they do not like are obligated to say so, either to the perpetrator or to someone in a position to alleviate the situation. Ignoring the situation will only encourage or escalate it. Institutions should have sexual harassment policies, and the procedures and commitment to follow through with them. Finally, those who harass without realizing they do so need to think about how they want other persons to feel as a result of a particular statement, look, or gesture. They should examine their motivation, as well as the verbal and nonverbal feedback they receive. (HTH)

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THREE COMMUNICATION RESPONSIBILITIES CONCERNING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

BY
BONNIE WILSON BUZZA, PH.D.
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF SPEECH
RIPON COLLEGE
P.O. BOX 248
RIPON, WISCONSIN 54971

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL CONVENTION
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THREE COMMUNICATION RESPONSIBILITIES CONCERNING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is not an easy topic to discuss (as we may well discover this afternoon). Bring it up informally in conversation and you will probably get one of three reactions: first, the joking remark that the individual wouldn't mind being harassed a little, "the old love life" having been a little slow lately; second, the angry comment that women can harass men, too; finally, the surprised reaction that there isn't any of that going on around here, is there, and could you give an example...?

Sexual harassment IS occurring on campuses--on all campuses and among and between all members of the campus community: faculty, students, administrators, and staff. From a subject that was largely unnamed before 1976, sexual harassment is finally beginning to receive serious study and attention from a few educational institutions, businesses, and researchers.

Women can, of course, harass men--and occasionally one does. If it comes to court we all know about it because it receives great coverage in the media. However (and with less press coverage), sexual harassment generally involves power or the perception of power and the plain fact is that most men have or seem to have more power than most women in work and academic settings. Sandler and associates indicate that "Although there may be instances of a female professor propositioning male students or a homosexual professor harassing gay students, there is little or no evidence to show that these are more than isolated cases."[1] Furthermore, most sexual harassment policies and laws are written in gender-neutral language and do

not describe or prohibit only male harassment of females.

Finally, if you like the attention, it's not sexual harassment! While mutually consenting sexual advances and relationships can present their own problems (and pleasures) on campus...sexual harassment is no joking matter. Baldridge and McLean reexamined earlier studies of sexual harassment and raised valid objections to their methodologies and findings. Then they undertook a controlled study and found that "62% of the respondents had experienced some form of sexual harassment."[2] They next examined the type of harassment that had taken place and found the most severe forms occurred infrequently, "exposure (5%), coercion into participating in unwanted sex acts (5%), rape (5%)."[3] Other forms of harassment were much higher, "unwanted sexual propositions (23%), unwanted physical contact (32%), sexual remarks (62%)."[4] They comment:

> One might be led to conclude from the small percents assigned to the more serious forms of harassment that the problem is not severe enough to worry about. But if the respondents in this study are at all representative, extrapolating the study's figures to all women employed in offices would suggest that over 100,000 women in this country have experienced rape in an office job with an equal number being coerced into participating in unwanted sex acts. Over 500,000 have experienced exposure. These numbers suggest that the problem is indeed serious.[5]

(Those are the numbers at the lower percentages. Consider them for the other forms of sexual harassment.)

Most of us do not experience the problem inthose proportions, however. Hopkins and Johnson considered sexual harassment among college graduates rather than using a random sample. The numbers were far lower...but they were there.[6]

Sexual harassment hurts and demeans the person who receives it, and it hurts and demeans the person who delivers it. It has no place on our campuses or in any

educational, work, or living environment.

This is a subject which merits sensitive and sensible discussion. Speech Communication professionals can provide insight and facilitation in such discussions if we will ourselves acknowledge the problem, become better informed about sexual harassment and ways of dealing with it, and commit ourselves to responsible communicative action.

In this presentation I will focus on sexual harassment in the context of communication ethics and responsibility rather than from other possible perspectives. I will outline three responses which I feel are specific actions of responsible communication and discuss them briefly. In addition, I will provide a short list of recommended readings on the subject of sexual harassment for those of you who wish to consider the subject more fully.

Before I indicate the three specific responsibilities I feel we have, I should note that the broadest ethical position I could take on sexual harassment is one that I think we would all agree to at the outset: DON'T DO IT. "Whatever developes, enlarges, enhances human personalities is good; whatever restricts, degrades, or injures human personalities is bad"[7] is Thomas Nilsen's phrase. If we can agree that sexual harassment restricts, degrades, or endangers, and if we can establish that a specific action constitutes sexual harassment, I think we would all agree we shouldn't do it. But the problem isn't that simple.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as interpreted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines of 1980, is the most frequently cited law prohibiting sexual harassment.[8] Court cases are clarifying specific points of interpretation as well. One clarification that is emerging is the difference between quid pro quo harassment ("Put out or get out" is the slang term), and work environment harassment (looks, comments, touching, innuendo, etc.) where the legal position is still unclear.

Quid pro quo harassment was at first not deemed against the law, but Courts of Appeals have now established the contrary precedent, and work environment harassment is beginning to follow the same pattern. In Kyriazi v. Western Electric (1978) the plaintiff had been subjected to sexual jokes and comments from co-workers for several years and received no assistance in answering her complaint. Eventually she was fired. She sued Western Electric in federal court for not promoting her and for underpaying her and at the same time filed sexual harassment charges in state court. She won settlements in both cases.[9]

Keely v. American Fidelity Assurance Company (1978), however, did not find the company liable for the supervisor's conduct, that of telling the plaintiff dirty jokes and placing his hands on her shoulders while explaining her work duties. The court believed the company knew nothing about the supervisor's conduct and found no quid pro quo arrangement requiring the plaintiff to submit to sexual demands to keep her job.[10]

These, however, are legal points, and ethical or responsible acts in many instances don't correspond exactly with legal ones.

To say simply "Don't harass each other" is an oversimplification of the problem and, I believe, formal and informal comments and policy statements which make this statement and then stop are in themselves irresponsible. At best they lull us into a false sense of having solved the problem; at worst they cover up real problems.

What are responsible communication actions that we can take? As I said, I have three to suggest. The first involves us all; the second places a responsibility on the harassed, the victim of harassment; the third places a responsibility on the presumably unknowing harasser.

Our first responsibility is to discuss the issue sensibly and sensitively, empathically, supportively, honestly. We are not going to understand sexual harassment unless we seek the information from the literature and from our friends

and colleagues...or unless we experience it directly ourselves. We shouldn't have to be hit by a truck to know trucks can hurt us, although unfortunately some of us are.

We all know that merely "talking at each other" is not communication, however, so we must pay careful attention to these discussions. We have an emotional topic, differing values and perceptions, and often defensive attitudes at the outset. Here we must practice what we teach, often so glibly, in class.

Furthermore, we must realize that individuals or groups may see nothing wrong with their actions, that these may be cultural patterns that have been reinforced generation to generation. Our colleagues who specialize in intercultural communication may have some insights for us as to how best to proceed if we are confronting strong regional and cultural differences on this issue.

Self-concept and self-esteem also seem to relate to this issue of sexual harassment. It has been indicated that power or the need to exercise power may be a reason for harassing another person. An individual who does not value or respect other persons is a more likely harasser of others than one who is responsive to their human worth. Or one who values himself or herself very little may well extend this low valuation to others, projecting personal esteem deficiencies onto the victim. One way to make oneself feel better can be to make another feel less good, especially if one's own self-esteem is low. If the victim has low self-esteem as well, he or she may accept the harassment or engage in self-blame. If the victim has high self-esteem, he or she is less likely to respond passively. Our colleagues who specialize in interpersonal communication can help us to understand such complexities and to provide explanations and assistance in discussions about sexual harassment with victims, harassers, and with out institutions and friends who are seeking to understand and formulate appropriate policy and procedures for dealing with sexual harassment.

We also don't have much experience discussing this sort of topic with each other without making a joke out of it. We can't let humor or attempted humor mask our difficulty in self disclosure, our unwillingness or inability to empathize, or our own narrow experiences or perspectives. Women often have as much difficulty as men in this respect; we were raised in the same culture, exposed to the same schools, watched the same media.

We need to initiate these discussions among our friends and colleagues of both genders, with administrators, with staff, and with students- responsibily and openly. We need to be willing to confront our own fears and faults, and those of our institutions and society as a whole. Unless we are willing to admit we may have made mistakes as individuals or groups of individuals in the past, no amount of so-called "commumication" will help us solve the problems any more effectively in the future.

Furthermore, institutions should have sexual harassment policies and the procedures and commitment to carry through with them. Much of this problem can be solved by creating an environment of awareness; our individual and collective consciousness needs to be raised on this issue. Machinery for informal discussion and internal grievance needs to be established so there is recourse before formal complaints and public litigation. Our institutions need our help in establishing these policies and procedures, and our colleagues and students need our assistance and support. As communication professionals and as individuals, we have a responsibility to involve ourselves in this issue.

That first was a very general recommendation; my second is a very specific one. If you experience a situation that you don't like, you MUST say so. That may not be easy to do, but until you make it clear to the person harassing you that you don't want the attention, he or she could claim that you seemed to enjoy it, or at least did not mind it. Remember, it has to be unwanted to be harassment.

Some sources advise us to ignore the incident, hoping it will stop. I disagree. This is generally not what happens, but rather the incidents continue or escalate. While it may seem easier to ignore the situation at the time--you will probably feel guilty or embarrassed or frightened--the problem is usually better handled in the early, simpler stages. The individual may indeed not realize you don't want the attention, and will stop it. Or the individual will be made quickly aware that you do not want to be treated in such a way, and that you will say so.

I also do not recommend making a joke of the situation. To "kid around" with the person who is harassing you, and then to complain to friends over coffee about it, or to suffer in silence, is not fair to anyone—and it will not make the behavior stop. If we avoid an uncomfortable situation by "kidding around," we are, I feel, acting irresponsibly and the would-be harasser has a right to feel confused and blame us or claim ignorance of our attitude.

TELL SOMEONE. In the Keely v. American Fidelity Assurance Company (1978) case cited earlier, part of the reason to find for the company was the belief that the company did not know about the action of its supervisor. If you don't like it, tell someone--at best the harrasser, or else your supervisor, a colleague or friend. The problem is most easily resolved if there is a company policy with procedures to follow. Rowe suggests specific formats for writing a letter about the incident of harassment, focusing on three things: what you felt happened, your feelings about the matter, and what you want to happen next.[11] It is important that you take specific action, both for the ceasing of the harassment and for your sense of self worth.

This does not mean that you have to act like the stereotype of an up-tight, humorless crusader shocked at any suggestion or thought of S-E-X. This means that you have enough respect for yourself and for those around you that you are willing to take responsible control of your own body and how it is used, physically and

verbally, by other people. I believe assertiveness is nearly always the best mode of response; aggressiveness and passivity (while in rare instances may be the wisest choice) both can escalate the problem in sexual harassment as they can in much communicative interaction.

Finally, to the third responsible action I feel the subject of sexual harassment demands. This is especially for those who harass without realizing they do so. I know that may sound like asking all who are absent to raise their hands...but since many may contribute to work environment harassment without realizing they do so, let's have everyone follow this suggestion.

Do a little audience analysis or feedforward. If you are sincere in not wanting to hurt or demean another person, before you use your mouth to make a comment or your eyes to ogle a piece of anatomy or your hands to give a "friendly fondle," think about how you want the other person to feel as a result of your action. If you want to make them feel uncomfortable (they're so cute when they blush and get all embarrassed) or to make yourself feel better or more powerful (that keeps them in line) your behavior is irresponsible and wrong. In many cases harassment stops when the harasser is made to realize the effect of his or her behavior on the victim, and the explanation "I didn't realize it upset you" at least sounds honest and sincere. But we shouldn't have always to react to such situations; many can be avoided and the climate for human interaction kept positive and productive.

Your intentions are not the only responsibility, however. Consider the effect of your "well intentioned" remark or action as well as the motivation for it. Look for feedback, verbal and non-verbal. Does the other person think it is as funny as you do? Is the other person having a good time as well? Really? While they should tell you if they aren't...you are often the person in power--the teacher, department chair, tenured faculty member. The victim often fears being victimized twice, the

initial incident and then retribution for objecting to it. With your greater power goes greater obligation to exercise it sensitively and responsibly.

What are you really saying? What is the meta--message?

Why are you saying it, really? Does your motivation enhance the dignity of you both?

What is the effect of your behavior? Does it correspond to what you wanted to achieve?

I think you can see why I emphasized the need for being honest if we don't like an action, to help the other person get accurate feedback so that he or she can change or stop the behavior. If you have an atmosphere of open and supportive discussion, my first point, I think you can see how both of the latter points (speaking out and thinking before we speak or act) will become easier--and maybe speaking out after instances of harassment would become largely unnecessary because the instances would become less common.

And if your goal is to embarrass, demean, or hurt the other, or to advance or enjoy yourself at another's expense, then your behavior is morally wrong and communicatively irresponsible. It is also probably legally actionably, and you should be brought to court for criminal and/or civil suit.

It shouldn't come to that very often. While we in Speech Communication should see that it does so when it is necessary, we can also educate ourselves and others to help prevent its being necessary. Our goal should be as Nilsen states, making ourselves and others aware that

> In no other area of conduct do we so continuously have an effect on other people, and so often have a choice of doing (for speech is an act) what is more or less good. With almost every statement or non-verbal cue, some shade of meaning can add to or detract from the well-being of the communicants, increase or decrease the harmony of the relationship, encourage or discourage

further constructive interaction.

...Morally good communications are those which best preserve the integrity of the ego, contribute to personal growth, and harmonize relationships. These ends are served by communications which, in addition to providing the information needed in a given situation, permit and encourage the expression of thought and feeling, and reveal respect for the person as a person.[12]

Endnotes

[1]Bernice R. Sandler and Associates, "Sexual Harassment: A Hidden Problem," Educational Record, 62 (1981), 52-57.

[2]Kathy Baldridge and Gary McLean, "Sexual Harassment: How Much of a Problem is it REALLY?" Journal of Business Education, 55 (1980), 294-297.

[3]Baldridge and McLean.

[4]Baldridge and McLean.

[5]Baldridge and McLean.

[6]Carter Hunter Hopkins and David Alan Johnson, "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace," Journal of College Placement, 42 (1982), 30-35.

[7]Thomas R. Nilsen, Ethics of Speech Communication, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1974), p. 14.

[8]Project on the Status and Education of Women, Title VII Sexual Harassment Guidelines and Educational Employment, (August 1980).

[9]Annette Gibbs and Robin B. Balthrope, "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace and its Ramifications for Academia," Journal of College Student Personnel, 23 (1982), p. 158-162.

[10]Gibbs and Balthrope.

[11]Mary P. Rowe, "Dealing with Sexual Harassment," Harvard Business Review, 59 (1981), p. 42-46.

[12]Nilsen, Ethics of Speech Communication, pp. 83-89.

Suggestions for Further Reading

1. Materials available from the Project on the Status and Education of Women, Association of American Colleges, 1818 R Street NW, Washington, DC 20009; both their regular publication "On Campus With Women" which has regular coverage of the topics of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination on our campuses, along with other topics, helpful materials and bibliographies, and special publications on this and related subjects.

2. Sexual and Gender Harassment in the Academy: A Guide for Faculty, Students and Administrators, by Phyllis Franlin and associates, and published by the Modern Language Association of America, 62 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011. This $3.50 publication proposes useful steps for establishing definitions, determining codes and standards, and developing grievance mechanisms and sanctions. It provides a good explanation of the distinction between sexual and gender harassment, considers recent judicial rulings and the question of institutional integrity, and the social and psychological implications of sexual harassment for women. There is a bibliography and are useful appendices as well.

3. There will be an article in the Winter 1982 issue of Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society by Judith Berman Brandenberg, Associate Dean of Yale College, entitled "Sexual Harassment in the University." Reprints will be available from her in January for $2.00 each.

4. Policy Statement on Sexual Harassment by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

5. Resolution concerning sexual harassment adopted by the American Association of University Professors, as well as materials available from AAUP's Committee W.

6. Constance Backhouse and Leah Cohen, Sexual Harassment on the Job: How to Avoid the Working Woman's Nightmare, Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, NJ

97632, $5.95, gives case studies and discusses various perceptions of harassment along with summarizing legal remedies and action plans for management and unions.

7. Sexual Harassment: How to Recognize It and Deal With It, Eastport Litho, 1993 Moreland Parkway, Annapolis, MD 21401, $3.50; includes examples of gender and non-gender related behavior and the nature and consequences of sexual harassment,

8. On related topics see: Sexuality in Organizations: Romantic and Coercive Behaviors at Work, edited by Dail Ann Neugarten and Jay M. Shafritz, available from Moore Publishing Company, Inc., 701 South Gunderson Avenue, Oak Park, Illinois 60304, for $9.00; "Observations on Flirting between College Students and Faculty," by David L. Rowland and Larry J. Crisler, Educational Research Quarterly, (Summer 1981), p. 87-93; "Love and Lust on Faculty Row," by Harry Zehner, Cosmopolitan, (April 1982), 269-273.

9. See also: The Institutional Self-Study Guide on Sex Equity and the Resource Directory on organizations and publications that promote sex equity in postsecondary education, each available at a cost of $10.00 from the Project on the Status and Education of Women, 1818 R Street NW, Washington, DC 20009.

10. There is now a nationally distributed quarterly entitled M. Gentle Men for Gender Justice, a project of the Regional Young Adult Project in San Francisco. The group lists its goals as the discussion of issues important to changing men; the affirmation of a healthy, life-loving, non-aggressive masculinity; and support of the network of men and women struggling to end sexism. The subscription rate to individuals for four issues is $8.00 and orders may be sent to M., Box 313, 306 N. Brooks Street, Madison, WI 53715.